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CULTURAL CONTRADICTIONS AND SEX ROLES: A REPEAT STUDY

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This article reports an approximate replication of a study by Komarovsky in 1942-43 on incompatible sex roles in the social environment of the college girl.¹ The article describes Komarovsky's investigation and the repeat study and then compares them in terms of (a) their quantitative findings and (b) their interpretations of the findings.

KOMAROVSKY'S STUDY

Komarovsky concluded from her data that college women are exposed to two contradictory roles. These are characterized by her as the "feminine" and the "modern" roles. In describing the former, she states that, "While there are a number of permissive variants of the feminine role for women of college age ('the good sport,' 'the glamour girl,' 'the young lady,' 'the domestic home girl,' etc.), they have a common core of attributes defining the proper attitudes to men, family, work, love, etc., and a set of personality traits often described with reference to the male sex role as 'not as dominant, or aggressive as men,' or 'more emotional, sympathetic.'"² The modern role, on the other hand, "partly obliterates the differentiation in sex. It demands of the woman much the same virtues, patterns of behavior, and attitudes that it does of the men of a corresponding age."³ During the college years the conflict between the feminine and modern roles "apparently centers about academic work, social life, vocational plans, excellence in specific fields of endeavor, and a number of personality traits."⁴

Komarovsky studied the nature and incidence of some components of these roles in 153 women seniors. (The socio-economic characteristics of the group are not reported.) Half the women were members of an undergraduate family course who wrote autobiographical papers on the topic. The other were all the students of a class in social psychology at the same eastern institution. Each of these women was interviewed for approximately an hour. The auto-

biographical and interview documents ranged from five to thirty typewritten pages. The general conclusion derived from the materials has already been presented; the more specific findings are discussed below following the description of the repeat study.

THE REPEAT STUDY

A replication of Komarovsky's investigation seemed worthwhile for two reasons: (1) because the original sample consisted of seniors in a single institution who were taking a course in the family or social psychology, there was some question as to whether the findings were more generally applicable, and (2) since the subjects of Komarovsky's research did not participate anonymously, what they wrote or said conceivably might have been influenced by their conception of what would present them in the most favorable light to the investigator or the interviewer.

The repeat study⁵ was carried out in 1949 in a western coeducational university where the ratio of men to women is about 3 to 1. A ten per cent random sample of unmarried, undergraduate female students was drawn from the campus directory. The 163 women so selected were asked to fill out a brief anonymous questionnaire and were given a short interview. The questionnaires were distributed—and the interviews conducted—by 54 members (33 men, 21 women) of a family class as part of the course work. Each person was assigned three subjects in such a way as to preclude his obtaining subjects known to him. The large majority of the subjects lived on or close to the campus and there was little difficulty in contacting them. Most of them were seen at their place of residence.

The questionnaire was two sides of a page in length. It was kept to a minimum size to encourage cooperation. It contained a number of questions about background characteristics as well as those concerned with the subjects' roles. The anonymity of the questionnaire was emphasized by the fact that subjects were told that on completing it, they were to seal it in an envelope to be returned to the writer.

The interviews were not meant to be used as a source of data because the interviewers were untrained.⁶ However, since reports of the inter-

¹ Mirra Komarovsky, "Cultural Contradictions and Sex Roles," *American Journal of Sociology*, 52 (November 1946), 184-189.

² *Ibid.*, 184-185.

³ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁵ I am greatly indebted to Patricia Hoagland and Rosemary Riley for their assistance in coding and tabulating the data.

⁶ The assignment was intended to give the students some first-hand acquaintance with interviewing

views provided some suggestive ideas for interpreting the questionnaire data a few words about the interview are in order.

The student interviewers were given a few general questions to put to the subjects and were requested to try to obtain a verbatim record of the answers. The questions were: (1) What do you consider appropriate behavior in your social relations with men? (2) What is your conception of the relative importance of academic and social activities? (3) What is your

or intending to major—in one of the social sciences, the remainder being distributed in the humanities (29 per cent), education (20 per cent), physical sciences (12 per cent), and in other fields (6 per cent). All but a negligible percentage were between 18 and 21 years of age, the majority being 19 or 20. Their parents were predominantly native born (93 per cent), Protestant (70 per cent), and of college level (both parents with one or more years of college, 70 per cent). Their fathers were largely in the

TABLE I. PERCENTAGE OF 163 WOMEN GIVING INDICATED RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ON PRETENDED INFERIORITY TO MEN

Question	Frequency					Total
	Very Often or Often	Several Times	Once or Twice	Never	No Answer	
1. When on dates, how often have you pretended to be inferior in artistic knowledge or taste (in music, art, literature, etc.)?.....	8.1	15.6	23.2	51.9	1.2	100.0
2. How often have you pretended to be intellectually inferior to the man?..	14.3	16.9	26.3	41.9	0.6	100.0
3. How often have you "played dumb" on dates because you thought the man preferred you that way?.....	7.5	11.2	22.6	58.7	—	100.0
4. How often have you pretended to be athletically inferior when participating in some sport with a man?.....	6.9	8.1	29.4	55.6	—	100.0

attitude toward marriage and a career? Each question was followed by an inquiry as to what was regarded as the source of the subject's ideas, conceptions or attitudes.

No precise check could be made of the representativeness of the sample of 163 women. Only one refused to cooperate and substitutions had to be made for a few who for various reasons could not be reached. There was a 4 per cent overrepresentation of lower-division students and a corresponding underrepresentation of upper-division women, but since school year was found to have no relation to the dependent factors of the study, this aspect of the sampling did not affect the findings.

About a third of the subjects were majoring—

and to provide them with an opportunity to hear the question of role conflict discussed in terms of the experience of members of their own campus community.

professions, in managerial and executive positions, or had their own business.

FINDINGS OF THE TWO STUDIES

Komarovsky does not report either the specific directions given the subjects who wrote accounts of their conflicts in roles or the questions asked those who were interviewed. In trying to duplicate her study with questionnaire data the writer attempted to deduce from the article the particular topics to which the subjects addressed themselves and to formulate some questions bearing on these topics.

The first set of items used for this purpose in the repeat study focused on the frequency with which women pretended inferiority to men. Such pretense involves a clash of the modern and feminine roles described by Komarovsky. In the modern role the college woman is defined as the equal of the male and is expected to strive for scholastic honors and for leadership in many

student activities. But insofar as in dating and other paired relationships with men the college woman is required to adopt the inferiority and subordination of the more traditional feminine role, she is exposed to contradictory expectations. The responses to the questions, reproduced in Table 1, show that many college woman, although conceiving of themselves as the equals of their male companions, feel called upon to pretend inferiority to them.

The percentages in Table 1 can be compared with one of the quantitative findings of Komarovsky's research. Forty per cent of her subjects indicated that they "have occasionally 'played dumb' on dates, that is, concealed some academic honor, pretended ignorance of some subject, or allowed the man the last word in an intellectual discussion."

The question in the repeat study touching this area most directly is that on frequency of pretended intellectual inferiority (Item 2, Table 1). Combining the percentages of women who checked "Several Times" or "Once or Twice" we get 46.2 per cent, a figure which is strikingly close to the 40 per cent of Komarovsky's sample. The latter percentage also corresponds closely to the equivalent percentages for the other three items in Table 1. It is interesting that about half the women in the repeat study pretended inferiority, even in the realm of artistic knowledge or taste in which presumably men adopt a permissive attitude to women's equality if not superiority.

Additional evidence in the repeat study of the pressure experienced by women students to assume a subordinate role to the male, although regarding themselves as equal or superior to him, is provided by the replies of the 163 subjects to the following two questions:

- (a) In general, do you have any hesitation about revealing your equality or superiority to men in intellectual, artistic or athletic competence?

Have considerable hesitation, 5 per cent; have some, 30.0 per cent; very little, 39.4 per cent; none at all, 25.6 per cent.

- (b) In your opinion, to what extent is it damaging to a girl's chances for dates if she is known to be outstanding in academic work?

Very much so, 2.5 per cent; somewhat, 24.5 per cent; a little, 37.6 per cent; not at all, 35.4 per cent.

The answers to these questions as well as those in Table 1 indicate that a substantial proportion of the women believe they are penalized in their relations with men if they manifest equality or superiority with respect to the latter in knowledge or ability in various areas.

Another question in the repeat study which intended to get at the role conflict of the college woman was: How often have you been advised to act more "feminine"? This advice implies that its recipients were regarded by their "advisers" as over-playing the modern role, which, as Komarovsky points out, tends to be more masculine than feminine in character. Less than half the women (45.1 per cent) had "never" been told this. Of the remainder, about 31 per cent had been so advised "one or twice," 21 per cent "several times," and 4 per cent "often" or "very often." The sources of the advice were: mother 66.7 per cent, father 24.2 per cent, brother or brothers 10.3 per cent, sister or sisters 9.2 per cent, boy friend or friends 19.5 per cent, and others 6.9 per cent.⁸

The second quantitative finding in Komarovsky's study was that 26 per cent of her respondents had "some grievance against their families for failure to confront them with clear-cut and consistent goals. The majority, 74 per cent, denied having had such experiences."⁹ The questions in the repeat study touching on this area and the responses to them are given in Table 2.

It should be noted that there is a divergence between Komarovsky's study and the present one in this phase of the inquiry. The former concerned itself with the conflict or contradiction in the conceptions held by the college woman's parents (or other family members) as to what her primary goals (her role) should be while in college. The present study investigated the contradiction between the conceptions of the college woman and those of her parents and others close to her. Inconsistency of parental expectations can be a source of difficulty, but so can parental expectations that are in complete accord when they are at variance with the college woman's own conception of what she should be doing. The critical question, therefore, is whether there is any incompatibility between the young woman's conception of what she should be doing in college (and what she wishes

⁸ The percentages total to more than 100 because some of the women reported getting the advice from two or more sources.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

to do after college) and the conceptions with which she is confronted by mother, father, other family members, boy friends or the man she expects to marry.

Actually, of course, the college woman will find herself in disagreement with at least one of her parents when her father and mother differ in their expectations. Consequently, the 26 per cent of the girls in Komarovsky's sample reporting inconsistent parental expectations can be assumed to have been at odds on what they were doing in college with one or both of their parents. This figure can be compared with the percentages (Table 2, question 1) of women in the repeat study reporting some contradiction between their conceptions of their college

peat study fell in this category.

Komarovsky's study did not distinguish between goals set by parents in the present and those urged for the future. The data of the present study indicate greater consensus between the college woman and her parents on her orientation to the future than on her present course of activities. Only 30 per cent of the subjects report some conflict with one or both parents in regard to what the latter would like them to do after finishing college.¹⁰

The data also revealed that conceptions of the college woman as to her present role in college are more likely to be in conflict with those of her father than with the conceptions of other family members whose opinion is re-

TABLE 2. PERCENTAGES OF 163 WOMEN REPORTING CONFLICT WITH FAMILY MEMBERS ON COLLEGE ACTIVITIES AND POST-COLLEGE PLANS

Question	Extent of Contradiction			
	None	A Little	Considerable	Total
1. How much contradiction is there between what you think and what the following think about how you should be spending your time in college?				
Father.....	66.3	27.4	6.3	100.0
Mother.....	70.1	25.5	4.4	100.0
Other family member whose opinion you respect.....	85.6	13.2	1.2	100.0
Boy friend or fiancé.....	83.2	15.6	1.2	100.0
2. How much contradiction is there between what you would like to do and what the following would like you to do when you finish college?				
Father.....	83.8	13.1	3.1	100.0
Mother.....	77.5	20.0	2.5	100.0
Other family member whose opinion you respect.....	89.3	8.8	1.9	100.0
Boy friend or fiancé.....	87.5	8.8	3.7	100.0

activities and those of their parents. About 34 per cent indicate some incompatibility with the views of their fathers, and 30 per cent some incompatibility with the views of their mothers.

But discrepancies between the conceptions of the college woman and those of *either or both parents* are present in 43 per cent of the cases, a significantly larger percentage than was found in Komarovsky's group. This difference, however, can be accounted for in part, at least, by the fact that the 26 per cent incidence of disagreement assumed for Komarovsky's sample does not include the women whose parents were in agreement with one another but whose expectations differed from those of their daughters. Twenty-three per cent of the women in the re-

spected and those of boy friends or fiancés.¹¹

In order to ascertain the nature of the contradictions, subjects were allowed space in the questionnaire to state them briefly. Their statements show quite clearly that the incompatibility of views about goals while in college revolve about the question of the relative emphasis to oriented to a career one would not expect them

¹⁰ The C.R. of the difference between 43 per cent and 30 per cent is 2.5.

¹¹ The C.R. of the difference between percentages of fathers and "other family members" with whom no contradiction is reported is 4.2. The corresponding differences between fathers and "boy friends or fiancés" has a C.R. of 3.2.

be given academic and social activities. In the majority of cases where there is some contradiction with the views of father or mother (or both), the parents are reported as favoring more attention to studies (the modern role) and less to dating and other social activities (the feminine role). This emphasis is also reported for other family members. Relatively few women indicated incompatibility with the views of their boy friends or fiancés.

The contradictions between the post-college goals of the subjects and those espoused by their parents, other family members, and boy friends or fiancés varied considerably in content. There is little or no evidence that the incompatibility of views in this sphere tends to involve the conflict of the modern and feminine roles.

INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS OF THE TWO STUDIES

The findings of the questionnaire data of the repeat study are in essential agreement with those of the original study based on case materials. They agree (a) that a substantial proportion of college women feel called upon on occasion to pretend inferiority to men while conceiving of themselves as equal (or superior) to them, and (b) that many college women are exposed to inconsistent parental expectations or (in terms of the repeat study) have views contradictory to those of either or both their parents as to how they should be spending their time in college. This congruence of findings from studies employing different methods and using samples from two institutions in opposite regions of the country argues for the presumption that the condition to which the findings refer is rather widespread. However, the interview data of the repeat study dispose the writer to the tentative conclusion that the problem is less momentous for the college woman than is suggested by Komarovsky's report.

The impression derived from Komarovsky's analysis and some of the excerpts quoted from her personal documents is that the college woman faced with incompatible expectations tends to be considerably disturbed by the experience. The writer's viewpoint is that in the large majority of cases the incompatibility either is not taken seriously or is rather readily resolved.

This judgement is based on the fact that in all but a few cases the subjects of the repeat study when interviewed expressed no grievance or resentment against parents or other persons for confusing or creating a conflict in them about the course they were to pursue in college or

afterwards. The relatively unemotional statements made by subjects in regard to differences between them and their parents suggest that as a rule the differences are not pressed by the latter and at most are regarded as an annoyance by the former.

There is likewise little indication in the interview data that most college women who sometimes simulate inferiority to the male are at all agitated by the contradiction between their behavior and their conception of themselves as equals of the male. The interview data point to some considerations which may account for this. There appears to be a selective process at work which leads women to whom this contradiction would be upsetting to favor the company of male companions with whom they feel simulation is not necessary. The women who simulate may not be unduly troubled because they tend to regard their occasional pretense of inferiority as part of a "line" which is appropriate to the dating situation in which it characteristically occurs. Because she is not deeply involved in the casual dating relationship, the college woman seems to be able to use the "line" without being perturbed by the thought that in doing so she is not "being herself," namely the equal of the male. But when her association with a particular male develops into a more meaningful companionship or love relationship, the dating role and its "line" are no longer called for and she *can* be herself. It is only in the probably infrequent instances when a woman temperamentally or otherwise strongly disposed to the modern role becomes emotionally involved with a male who requires the feminine role of her that great psychological stress might be anticipated.

There are a number of possible explanations of the difference between Komarovsky's evaluation and that proposed here of the psychological consequences for the college woman when she is exposed to conflicting role conceptions. The writer's interpretation may not be valid because of the inadequacies of the interview data on which it is based. Or Komarovsky's case history excerpts—from which her evaluation has, in part, been inferred by the writer—advertently may not be typical of her entire sample in regard to the particular issue at question. Finally the possibility must be considered that there are some critical differences between the women of the original and repeat studies. The women investigated in the latter research are almost unanimously oriented to marriage, a home and children, and unlike college women

to be militantly attached to the modern role. If Komarovskiy's group included an appreciable number of career women, their vested interest in the modern role would have weighted the sample with persons for whom a conflict between the modern and feminine roles would be a matter of greater consequence.

FAMILY SIZE OF STUDENTS AT A TEACHERS COLLEGE

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The size of the family has been the subject of numerous pieces of investigation. This has been especially true of the families of college students.¹ These studies have been concerned primarily with students in liberal arts colleges and restricted chiefly to colleges in New England. Despite the exploration of this phenomenon, no investigation, to the knowledge of the authors, has been published on the students enrolled in teachers colleges. This study will be concerned, therefore, with family size of students enrolled at a teachers college.

During the fall semester of 1948 schedules were submitted to 738 students at the Illinois State Normal University—an institution for the education of teachers located in central Illinois. Schedules were completed by approximately one-third of the student body. Care was exercised to draw the sample proportionately from members of the four undergraduate classes of the college. The inquiry concerned itself with the determination of the number of live births in the families of the students interviewed; also with the number of live births in the families of the fathers and of the mothers of the students.

The results showed that the average number of live births in the families of students was 3.68; also the average number of live births in the families of the mothers of students was 5.51 while the average in the families of the fathers was 5.25. Thus, in one generation, a substantial decline in the average size of families is demonstrated. Stated in different form, 54 per cent of the families of students had three

or fewer children while 28 per cent of the mothers' families and 30 per cent of the fathers' families fell into this category. These facts are consistent with those in the Mt. Holyoke study,² in which the average number of children in the families of students at Mt. Holyoke was 2.8 while the average size of families of the mothers' generation was 4.8 persons.

Compared with other colleges in which similar studies have been made, the results show that the average number of live births in families of

TABLE 1. VARIATION IN SIZE OF FAMILY BY
INSTITUTIONS

Institutions	Date of Study	Average Size
Illinois State Normal University	1948	3.68
University of Maine	1940	3.67
Colby	1940	3.28
Bowdoin	1940	3.04
Vassar	1928-31	2.8-3.1
Mount Holyoke	1936	2.8

students enrolled at the Illinois State Normal University was larger than the average size in any of five other studies. This summary is shown in Table 1. There may be various reasons for this situation. First, students at teachers colleges are likely to be recruited more largely from open-country areas and villages—where birth-rates are higher—than the students whose families were examined in other studies. Second, they may be recruited from families whose culture patterns do not include, so largely as the families of students in liberal arts colleges, the limitation of family size.

In keeping with other studies, consideration was given to the size of families in relation to religious affiliations. Of the 738 persons covered in the study, 696 identified themselves as belonging to one of three religious classifications. The average family size of the 114 students both of whose parents were Catholics was 3.99 while the average for the 548 students whose parents were Protestants was 3.70. However, the 34 students whose parents were Protestant-Catholic showed 2.79 as the average family size. Stated somewhat differently, 29 per cent of the Catholic, 35 per cent of the Protestant and 56 per cent of the Protestant-Catholic families had no more than two live births.

That family size is declining regardless of

¹ In this study reference will be made to the study by Mabel Newcomer and Evelyn S. Gibson, "Vital Statistics from Vassar College," *American Journal of Sociology*, 29 (January 1934), 130-142; to Ruth O. Truex, "The Size of Family in Three Generations," *American Sociological Review*, 1 (August, 1936), 581-591; and to H. D. Lamson, "Family Size of College Students in Maine," *Social Forces*, 21 (December, 1942), 180-185.

² Ruth O. Truex, *op. cit.*